NATIONAL DATE FEST
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COACHELLA, VALLEY, CA

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Protests flare over tobacco

Desert Sun photo by Andy Gonzalez

DRAWING CRITICISM: National Date Festival visitors stream by the Marlboro booth at the fairgrounds in Indio on Friday.

DATE FEST PRESENCE: Critics say Marlboro booth sends wrong message to kids; company says it aims marketing at adults.

By Pam Belluck
The Desert Sun

INDIO — At least 1,000 people who visited the Riverside County Fair and National Date Festival want Marlboro, its money and its booth stocked with fresh-faced models off of the property.

That's how many have so far signed a petition circulated by the Tri County South Regional Tobacco Free Project. The group expects to have even more names signed up by fair's end on Sunday.

The petitions will be used to urge county supervisors to prohibit tobacco's sponsorship of any event held on publicly funded ground.

Philip Morris, the maker of Marlboro, paid the county $35,000 to allow the booth.

"Taxpayers should not pay to have this product marketed on their property," said Bob Paterna, senior health educator for the county's health department. "There are people at the county hospital in Riverside dying of lung disease, yet here's Marlboro on county land pushing the stuff that killed them there."

The fair has no legislative plans to end its association with Marlboro or Philip Morris.

"Right now, I don't think the tobacco company has been a good sponsor of the event," said Brad Hudson, executive director of the economic development agency, which oversees the fair. The festival makes money from [illegible] economic and business [illegible] issues of [illegible] said.

Hudson said he doesn't think the festival should be penalized when other public agencies and organizations have ties to tobacco.

"Why does the federal government subsidize tobacco? That's a question I can't answer," he said.

Other fairs have declined tobacco sponsorships.

In April, Del Mar fair officials rejected a decision to accept more than $100,000 from Marlboro for a day sponsorship during their fair. A monthslong campaign of community uproar lead to the reversal.

Marlboro's main booth at the date festival is on one of the main drags. It is staffed by a young, friendly group with "Baywatch" looks and breezy smiles. During the day, they give out free lighters. After 7 p.m., they sell cigarettes to those 18 and older.

The county health department's Tobacco Control Project booth is tucked in a corner near the date and citrus exhibition hall. The educators who staff it take one look at the Marlboro booth and see a blatant attempt to dodge advertising rules.

"I think it's specious. Clearly their marketing and advertising efforts are aimed at young people," said Paterna. "They'll deny it, but they're lying. They do about everything."

SPOKESMAN'S RIGHTS: Tara Carraro, a spokeswoman with Philip Morris U.S.A., said the company's festival booths are designed to increase awareness of the product among adults. None of the giveaways, surveys or sales involve minors, she said.

"We believe smoking is an adult choice," Carraro said. "All of our activities are strictly designed for smokers who are over the age of 21."

Salvador Becerra, 13, a sixth-grader at Valley View School in Coachella, said he didn't think it was right for Marlboro to be at the fair.

"When they see them, then the little kids want to do it," he said. "(The children) don't understand that it's wrong. It affects their bodies and it affects their lungs."

But Alan Mobley, 17, a senior at Banning Advocate school, said he doesn't believe Marlboro's presence inspires young people to smoke. Nor does he feel that tobacco advertising is aimed at people his age.

Mobley said none of the industry's advertising techniques played a role in his decision to smoke Marlboro and clove cigarettes, something he said he's been doing for years.

"I don't see anything wrong with it," he said. "I started because I didn't have anything else to do with my time and money."

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